

# “Projections”

## (or “How an Apparatus Becomes Self-Aware”)

An Exploration of Reading and Writing in  
Emerging Technologies

by Heather Marcelle Crickenberger



Presented on Saturday, April 5, 2014  
at NC State University's James B. Hunt, Jr.  
Library as part of the 2014 North Carolina  
Literary Festival

*“For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.”*

-Walter Benjamin

“Installation art” involves the staging and framing of spaces as interactive texts for contemplation. It is an art form that encourages and reflects a critical approach to constructed space, one that can be extended to the world of the everyday.

The James B. Hunt, Jr. Library's *Creativity Studio* is both a highly-modifiable writing apparatus and an interactive space. It has full networking capabilities and is comprised of two rooms, multiple cameras, projectors, monitors, and adjustable panels that serve as projection surfaces suspended from an elaborate tracking system.

It is a canvas that invites its users to imagine *the future of reading* as a response to the ever-advancing technologies of textual production and the new ways of seeing they make visible.

The apparatus is currently configured to emphasize its potential as a versatile means of artistic expression, one that blurs the line between word and image and transforms and allows texts to be experienced as interactive environments.

Here, images and words emerge in varying constellations. Wrenched free of their context, they combine to form fleeting landscapes of minutia, mixing history with fiction, advertisement with propaganda, and manufacturing with high art.

The flat, framed-in world of the computer screen takes on new dimensions as it interacts with transparent and reflective surfaces at varying angles.

The text becomes a physical space, through which each reader is left to wander, a unique cache of all that is lost in the dream.

---

Special thanks to NC State University, the Hunt Library's staff and technical support team, the Friends of the Library and Jason Jefferies who provided conceptual assistance and some photographs used in the installation.

## PROJECT INTRODUCTION

This project draws heavily on the work of writer Walter Benjamin, a German theorist and philosopher of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who spent his life investigating and experimenting with the way writers use technology to restructure their work and thereby make new ways of reading possible. Now, more than seventy years after his failed attempt to escape Nazi persecution, the scope of his vision is beginning to take form, as the tools and canvases writers use evolve and change. In this slideshow, some of his primary themes and practices are briefly summarized.

## WALTER BENJAMIN

Benjamin was a twentieth-century German writer and scholar who wrote about technologies of writing and how these technologies affect our perceptions of the world and our representations of it. Drawing on literature, Jewish mysticism, historical materialism and the evolving art of photography, Benjamin wrote innumerable volumes exploring the manner in which artists and writers have recorded the poetry of daily life. His greatest work, *The Arcades Project*, is a multimedia collection that examines the architectural phenomenon of the Parisian arcades and its relevance to philosophy, literature, and economics as an emblem of modern consciousness. Within these passages, Benjamin located the character of the *flâneur*, who he believed embodied the reader in an increasingly complex world.

## THE FLÂNEUR

*Flâneur* is the name given to the wealthy educated men who wandered the arcades during the nineteenth century, reading the surrounding scenes like texts designed for their own amusement. He was the shopper with no intention to buy, though with plenty of money to spare; thus overcoming his kind of aloofness forced the world of advertisement to cross-over into the world of literature and art.

Wealthy, educated, and without need of a job, the *flâneur* was removed from the economic hardships of life. His greatest enemy was boredom. He strolled the arcades in search of novelty—the kind of art that occurs by chance—scrutinizing the fashions of the day, the menus, shop windows, and wares for sale as displays as texts to be read in moments of idleness.

Though long a creature of the past, there is something of his attitude that remains when we read online—transient, aloof, detached from each source's context.

## THE ARCADES

Made possible by 19th-century advances in iron and glass construction, one that parallels in its effects the invisible enclosures through which we wander in hyperspace today, the arcades were not the result of city planning but instead emerged as improvised structures as capitalism began to take root.

Merchants banded together and commissioned their construction in hopes of using the shelter they offered to lure customers off the boulevards in times of bad weather. As constructed worlds, these passages offered their dwellers an experience that was both aesthetic and commercial. Storefront windows became artistic installations and advertisements became works of art.

By the time Benjamin began his research for *The Arcades Project* in the late 1920s, these arcades were falling into ruin with the rise of department stores and malls. Their story speaks to the future of text in our time—as an ever-expanding network of improvised connections burrowing through a global community in transition between economic systems.

## THE ARCADES PROJECT

While a few of his writings emerged on the intellectual scene in 1968, *The Arcades Project* was not to assume bound book-form until its publication in 1982 (English version, 1999). It is a work of scholarship that more resembles a stack of file folders a collector

of textual artifacts might pull from a filing cabinet than a book.

Here, Benjamin approaches the task of reading not as a critic who reduces and interprets the texts he reads so that he might fit them into a well-wrought argument for whatever purpose, but as an exploration—an investigation—that serves as an end in itself. It is a way of looking at research and scholarship that is on the rise as our technologies of writing evolve to accommodate such a process.

## THE AUTHOR AS AESTHETIC ENGINEER

Much like poet and artist William Blake used etching as part of his writing process to create poems that present language and image as a single unit, Benjamin reconfigured scholarship to better represent the experience of the modern reader.

Such an innovation in the writing process speaks to the concurrent roles writers play today as researchers, storytellers, and textual engineers, no longer simply supplying publishers with content, but instead, self-consciously modifying the way readers inhabit and engage that content.

This artistic installation is intended to explore these new roles in a way that makes their effects visible physically.

---

**Feel free to Tweet pics of your own  
experience to @hmcricken  
#arcadesprojections.**

**For more information see  
<http://arcadesprojectproject.com> or contact  
the artist at <https://twitter.com/hmcricken>.**